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Glass Hits High Notes in Marrakech and Fez

Sean Sheehan March 9, 2020 Feature, Travel

The first high, a literal one, came after taxiing away from Marrakech airport. I had been glancing back through the rear window for a final appreciation of the airport's stunning design: all shining rhombuses and a soaring cantilevered roof. The shock, after turning around in my seat, was seeing rugged summits of the Atlas Mountains on the horizon ahead. My destination, at an altitude of over 1600m, was a restored fortress situated in the foothills of Jbel Toubkal, North Africa's highest mountain (first seen by European eyes in 1871).



A table at Maison Moi Anan



Only four hours had passed since leaving London but the drive through a Moroccan hinterland to reach [Kasbah du Toubkal](#) hinted at a sense of time travel. The empty terrain of rough sandstone was occasionally broken by heavily laden mules and people in variously coloured djellabas.

When, an hour later, I found myself sipping mint tea on the roof terrace of Kasbah du Toubkal, gazing at mountain valley scenery, the feeling of being in another world was confirmed.

I was here for a gentle trek to a neighbouring valley. The 12-km trail was followed with a guide and a mule carrying luggage for a one-night stay in Kasbah du Toubkal's trekking lodge. It was a delightful day's outing and the five hours it took included a leisurely picnic lunch along the way. Flocks of little egrets and alpine choughs were in the sky and, on the ground, small plots filled with bearded irises; the flowers are cultivated for their medicinal and cosmetic value.





Inside Hotel Sahrai photo by Andie Moore

The repose of Kasbah du Toubkal is followed by time in the pink-walled city of Marrakech. Hustlers are vexing but a customised tour by [Plan-It Morocco](#) cuts through the hassle to reveal the gorgeous mosaic tiling (*zellij*) of the Saadian Tombs, Bahia Palace and the Ali Ben Youssef madrasa. The tour includes the surreal Jardin Majorelle where desert plants create strangely lush landscapes. The garden owes its preservation to the North African couturier, Yves St Laurent, who made the city his second home: 'Marrakech taught me colour' he said. Musée Yves St Laurent, next door to the garden, has a collection of his dresses and gowns that bears testimony to this.

The secret to managing Marrakech is to stay somewhere like [Le Farnatchi](#). In a city where accommodation can have either a French or British bias, its name is deceptive. It is the English who warm to Le Farnatchi's ability to compact a five-star hotel into a set of ten suites. There are two courtyards – one with a small pool; the other serenely composed around citrus trees – plus a lovely roof garden, a hammam with massages and body wraps, and Le Trou au Mur restaurant. There's a lot to be said for a restaurant in Marrakech that can deliver a perfectly prepared martini and a discriminating selection of Moroccan wines. Le Trou au Mur's food menu mixes the traditional, like *trid* and *tangia*, with steaks, hamburgers and a medley of superb Moroccan salads.



Simple but stylish Le Kilim

[Nomad](#), a hip four-storey restaurant in the heart of the medina, has rooftop tables where straw hats are ready-to-hand if the sun is blazing down. The food has a chic accent as well as being vegetarian-friendly with dishes like cauliflower roasted in red chermoula and ras-el-hanout. For an enjoyable meal off the tourist trail, a new restaurant outside Marrakech's medina, [Le Kilim](#), should not disappoint. The menu – like the décor – is refreshingly contemporary without abandoning a Moroccan identity.

Fez, also spelt Fes, is altogether different to Marrakech and shopping in its souk is a more intriguing experience. Less attuned to consumerism, its metalwork, tajines and trinkets, perfumes and jewellery are all crafted within the medina. I was looking for a bellows to help light a wood-fuelled stove and found some displayed in an atelier where a carpenter was engaged in making them. He named his price and, assuming some bargaining was de rigueur, it was refreshing to have my negotiating endeavour flatly rejected. He was crafting them for local use and, gladly purchased, the bellows are proving robust.

The treasures of Fez are elusive, typified by [Palais Amani](#) where the door of its nondescript, windowless exterior opens onto a stunning courtyard with a garden of orange and lemon trees framed by tiled columns. Once the home of a wealthy family – this is the largest riad in the city – it has been transformed into a sumptuous hotel with eighteen rooms, hammam, two bars, a restaurant and a cooking school. While small touches, like rose petals on the towels, typify attention to detail, the tiles and arches in the hammam (steam baths, body scrubs, massages and facials) evoke oriental indulgence while comforting the body.

Palais Amani's cooking school opens a window into the daily life of Fez when you follow the chef buying ingredients for the meal you will be cooking. It beats a guided tour – and with more interesting photo opportunities – when you *taste* the city's culture with a bowl of *bissara* (fava soup) and a *sfnj* (Moroccan doughnut) from tiny, scrupulously clean eateries in the souk. And, when you've cooked your meal, you get to keep the fez hat that you wore in the kitchen.





On the roof at Hotel Sahrai photo by Andie Moore

Fez has a restaurant in a class of its own: **Nur**. After knocking on a blue door, you step behind a curtain and into an arty room with Botero-like dreamy paintings, a photo of Salvador Dali, peacock feathers in a jar and lovely tiled flooring. There is no menu but this is the business when it comes to Moroccan flummery-free fine-dining. Vegetarians will be as delighted as carnivores by the refined treats that Najat Kaanache conjures up course by course in her tiny kitchen.

When you'll want to escape Fez's medina and souk but keep it close at hand, **Hotel Sahrai** is the place of choice. This stylish hotel – enjoying chic accents from French designer Christophe Pillet – stands on a hill top with fine views of the walled city from the poolside area. Two restaurants and the Jangle bar attract cosmopolitan Moroccans as well as discerning tourists and with a shuttle service into the city and a large Carrefour a short walk away, the Sahrai has a lot going for it.

The blending of traditional design motifs with responsiveness to modernity exhibits itself in places as different as Marrakech's airport and Hotel Sahrai. At the airport, light is filtered by arabesques on the walls to create dappled shadows; from Sahrai's poolside area, ancient Fez is glimpsed through pampas grass. Morocco as a whole is like this: its treasures are obliquely present, waiting to be appreciated but never in your face.

by Sean Sheehan

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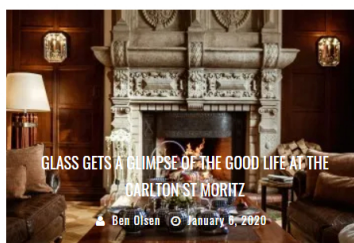
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